

# Orimoto Hyogu

Striving for perfection in traditional materials and methods through genuine craftsmanship

## Information

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Working with great pride and sincerity to pass on the ancient skills and materials used by genuine *hyogushi*

*Hyogu* generally refers to *makimono* (scrolls), *kakejiku* (hanging scrolls), *byobu* (folding screens), *fusuma* (paper sliding doors), *tsuitate* (screens), *gaku* (framed pictures), *gajo* (picture albums), etc., made by pasting pieces of cloth or paper together. It is also known as *hyoso*, and the craftsmen who work with *hyogu* are known as *hyogushi*. Their main job is to restore *kakejiku*, *byobu*, *tsuitate*, *gaku*, *gajo*, *makimono*, etc., as well as to make and repair *fusuma*, *shoji* (paper sliding screens), etc.

Orimoto Hyogu's factory, adjoining Mr. Orimoto's house, is located in Hachioji of Western Tokyo, a city with a relatively large number of *hyogushi*. There are stores, which despite claiming to provide *hyogushi* services, have actually adapted to the everyday needs of modern-day Japanese people, using cloths that are suited to Western-style interiors. However, Mamoru Orimoto pays particular attention to using only *washi* (Japanese paper). This is because there is still often a need for *hyogu* skills using traditional materials and methods, even though there is greater overall demand for the use of cloth, which is also cheaper. The number of craftsmen capable of handling traditional methods with sincerity and reliability is dwindling, so that is where Orimoto Hyogu has found a niche market. The job of a *hyogushi* is highly varied, but Mr. Orimoto is particularly skilled at restoring *shoji* and *fusuma*. He has been receiving fewer orders from general households, but there is a constant stream of orders from sub-subcontractors of major construction companies to restore or make new *fusuma* and *shoji* for buildings. He is sometimes even asked to repair or restore other furnishings that he is not an expert in. This is believed to be the result of his sincere attitude toward his work. Mr. Orimoto uses standards and materials every day that are suited to the physical needs of Japanese people, and the secret behind his skills lies in nothing else but devoting himself wholeheartedly and with sincerity to every single task that he is placed in charge of overseeing. He strives daily to achieve perfection in the quality of his *hyogu* in which errors of a few millimeters can change the user-friendliness or long-term durability of the *fusuma* and *shoji* that his customers use every day.



Attitude of meeting modern needs, while striving for perfection in achieving traditional methods

The history of *hyogu* stretches back to ancient times, and it is believed to have arrived in Japan from China along with Buddhism. It began with the decorating of images of Buddha and scrolls of Buddhist scriptures for enhanced visual appreciation. Upon arriving here, it was adapted to suit the lifestyles of people in Japan, evolving into its current form. The way the brush is used when spreading water or paste on the paper or cloth is changed subtly depending on the weather at the time or the properties of the materials used, requiring extremely advanced and delicate skills. Most of Mr. Orimoto's recent customers have been major construction companies, followed by their subcontractors, then carpenters. Fewer houses now are built with Japanese-style rooms and the demand for interior furnishings in general has been declining, including orders from general households. Meanwhile, many craftsmen now claim to be *hyogushi*, even though they use cloths, plastics or vinyl chloride, which are cheaper than *washi* or wood, which had been used since ancient times. Although there has been greater overall demand for these substitute materials, there is still considerable demand for *washi* and wood due to traditional materials being more durable. Unfortunately, it is also undeniable that demand for traditional materials has been declining.

Orimoto Hyogu has its roots in Mr. Orimoto's grandfather. His grandfather was not originally involved in interior decoration, but he worked at a *hyogu* factory elsewhere. After he quit his job, he became an apprentice at a *hyogu* store run by the relatives of a brother-in-law. Mr. Orimoto's father was influenced by the grandfather, and founded Orimoto Hyogu around 1960. After operating in Kodaira and Kokubunji, quite close to Hachioji City, the store moved to its current location over ten years ago. There are many fellow craftsmen and customers in Western Tokyo, so moving far from the area was apparently out of the question. The factory, located on the same property as the house, is also a style that has remained unchanged since the early days.

As for Mamoru, he dropped out of high school to help run Orimoto Hyogu, which his father had founded. After that, at the age of 18, he began working as a courier while helping his father's business, and simultaneously entered university to study law, which he had been interested in. After graduating university, he continued working as a courier and helping his family business, but just before he turned 40 around 1995, he decided to sit a national licensing exam so that he could inherit the family business. Unfortunately, he failed this exam. He was invited by a member of the Hyogu Association, who was the examiner at the exam he had sat, to attend a vocational school to see the different kinds of jobs that people did. This inspired him to devote himself seriously to studying *hyogu*. He says it was then that he also decided to put his heart and soul into becoming a craftsman for the first time. His father

has now retired, and Mamoru does all the work by himself, and travels back and forth between his worksites and factory every day.

*Hyogu* craftsmen often only play supplementary roles in downstream processes, so it is an absolute necessity to gain the understanding of people engaged in the upstream processes of projects. For example, fewer craftsmen and clients today understand terminology related to paper, which in the past was common knowledge. *Hyogu* craftsmen are no longer able to talk to others on the same level. But they cannot live on their own. Clients are important because they place orders, but this situation may lead to the obsolescence of the traditional skills of *hyogu* craftsmen. Mr. Orimoto, too, takes great pride in the skills that have been passed down through the generations, and he wants to preserve the authentic way of using paper and wood, instead of plastic. But the unfortunate reality is that his livelihood is dependent on what his clients want. Furthermore, there are many *fusuma* craftsmen and *hyogu* craftsmen, but a lot of them actually use cloths, which are cheaper and faster to work with than *washi*. Only a handful of craftsmen deal with genuine *fusuma*. Many of Mr. Orimoto's relatives were also involved in *hyogu*, but a lot of them closed their businesses due to old age, or switched to using cloth, and he is sometimes asked why he continues working with traditional *fusuma*. At one stage, Orimoto *Hyogu* too, began taking orders for cloth products. But Mr. Orimoto narrowed his focus and returned to paper in preparation for the time when the price war would heat up. He says he would not have been able to continue his business in dealing with paper *fusuma* if he had been even a little late in making the decision to revert back to paper.

In using cloth, some people pass the sliding doors through a machine to press the cloth onto them. This results in a beautiful finish, but it is not as durable as naturally dried paper, and results in distortion. Moreover, once it is stuck on, it cannot be removed and replaced, making it impossible to restore repeatedly. Mr. Orimoto says with pride that if you have something that has been passed down to you that you value, it is definitely better to do it by hand, even if it takes time.

One of the reasons for this situation is the lack of successors to inherit these *hyogu* skills. "It's hard to explain, but there are differences between people in the sound they make or their rhythm when hammering nails, or the way they use their brush. You feel it instinctively. Some people are able to accept these differences, while other aren't. I always feel uncomfortable with these differences, even though I can't explain them rationally, so I find it easier to work on my own. When you take on apprentices, they have to attain the same skills at an extremely meticulous level. I think there are many people in this industry who feel the same way."

The number of craftsmen in this industry is also declining due to aging, but businesses have always tended to be run by families, resulting in reluctance to pass them on to outsiders. This has narrowed the possibilities and created an insular system. Contrary to the desire to pass on the traditional methods, the number of craftsmen continues to decline, but it is a fact that the skills of the craftsmen are also highly prized.





### Handling materials with great care in prioritizing their durability

Replacing the outer frame and pull handles of fusuma (the doors of Japanese-style rooms) begins with removing the washi covering the fusuma framework. A mere hour is not enough to do even a part of this work. The main part of a *hyogushi*'s everyday job is to dismantle and restore existing fusuma and shoji. There is more work in restoring them than in making new ones. In Mr. Orimoto's case, he examines the internal parts for damage and washes other parts too, even if he has only been asked to restore the external visible parts of the fusuma. "There's a limit to how much I can do in a single day. As a general rule, my job involves working with paper and paste. So, I have to wait until the paste dries completely before I can move onto the next stage of fitting the outer frame. or the paper will warp. If a craftsman claims he can do all of this in one day, he is definitely cutting corners. It's simply impossible."

It usually takes seven or more days to replace the washi on fusuma. When new paper is pasted onto the fusuma, it stretches, shrinks or warps as the paste dries, changing the overall shape. So, it has to be adjusted, or the work has to be carried out by anticipating how the paper will change. This requires extremely careful and delicate work. "You normally work by anticipating how the paper will change shape, but many people nowadays just concentrate on finishing the job, and end up doing it half-heartedly. There are more *hyogushi* now that don't care about small gaps in the paper. But gaps result in the leaking of light, and it won't be appreciated by customers either."

The main materials and tools used to carry out this work are washi, paste, and blades and brushes used to dismantle the fusuma and cover it with new paper. A lot of people nowadays carry out the work with a ruler and a box cutter, but they also sometimes use a short knife when necessary.

## The tools used by Orimoto Hyogu



### 01\_Fish slicing knife

This is a knife that was probably given to Mamoru's father by a restaurant owner. There are no knives made specially for *fusuma* craftsmen. People use whatever suits them. The fish slicing knife was probably just right for Mamoru's father.

### 02\_Dagger or *suishinshi*

This is rarely used today, and has become rusty. But it is still usable if it is re-sharpened, which is why it has been kept. It is a type of knife that is often used by *hyogushi*.

### 03\_Made knife

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### 04\_Brushes

This is a brush used in *urauchi* (known as 'fleshing' in which *washi* is lined with another sheet of *washi* for extra strength). The name differs depending on the shape; *edohake* (triangular, white brush) and *kyobake* (round brush). The different types are used depending on what 'feels right' at the time. The black bristles are made from palm. The brush made from the hair of a raccoon dog (small brown brush) apparently smells like a wild animal when it is wet.

### 05\_Kiwaganna (corner-cutting plane)

Called a *sarutori* or a *kiwaganna*, this is used to plane edges and other fine parts. It is often used during *shitabari* (pasting on the initial layer of *washi*)

### 06\_Plane inherited from his father

Mamoru inherited this plane from his father, and it has been used for at least 60 years. The longer the plane blade, the more beautiful the shavings, indicating that the blade is straight and flat.



### Taf-Top

On the other hand, materials available from general do-it-yourself stores are sometimes used, too.



### Glue

There is a tacit understanding among craftsmen that paste should never be made visible from the outside. The type, concentration and width over which the paste is applied differs from person to person, and the difference can be recognized instantaneously. The pastes also differ depending on whether they are used for, e.g., *kakejiku* or cloth. The white lumps may all look the same, but it is apparently possible to tell how each craftsman does his work just by looking at them. Paste is made from flour, so it goes off after one day. Therefore, it has to be mixed with preservatives or adhesives that are available on the market.



The job of a *hyogushi* is to deliver more than what the customer expects

Mr. Orimoto is particularly skilled at restoring *fusuma*, but what he finds most difficult about it is making sure the patterns match. It is most difficult to replace or restore the paper on two *fusuma* when the picture depicted on them is that of, e.g., a traditional landscape painting. The utmost care has to be taken from the start when cutting the paper. Moreover, paper stretches and shrinks requiring the implementing of a variety of measures. In other words, the most beautiful state to aim for is to make sure the pictures on the two doors fit perfectly. The pictures must not only fit perfectly, but the greatest beauty is achieved when the *fusuma* are delivered and installed on-site, and they fit tightly in place without letting any light pass through. Something else that Mr. Orimoto also strives for all the time is to deliver more to his customers than they expect. "My customers expect a certain level of work, but I go beyond their expectations. When my customers ask me to restore their *fusuma*, my job doesn't stop at doing only what I was asked to do. Installing the doors on-site is also a part of my job. If the doors do not fit the door frame perfectly, I use a plane to make subtle adjustments on-site."

If the doorframe is badly skewed, he takes measurements in advance, before removing the *fusuma*. Then he uses a plane or adds on pieces of wood to make adjustments accordingly. He makes an out-of-shape *fusuma* on purpose, and re-covers it with *washi*. Temples and other such old buildings become skewed over the years, and the *fusuma* he restores for such buildings are sometimes rhomboid in shape. The instincts of a *hyogushi* are unfathomable as they work with materials and adapt them to the needs of Japanese-style architecture, which has coexisted with nature over the course of time.

Incidentally, Orimoto Hyogu offers its services for standard prices as a *hyogu* store. The cost of making the average household *fusuma* (with a standard three by six size) is around 12,000 to 25,000 yen per door. It costs double, or around 24,000 to 50,000 yen for a set of two doors. This is more expensive than cloth doors, because of the skills that are required, but Mr. Orimoto does not make a big profit considering the time and gasoline required for him to visit his customers on-site.

If a part of a *fusuma* has been damaged by, e.g., a hole, Mr. Orimoto generally suggests restoring both doors using the same paper so that the doors match. He places his customers first to make sure he is able to deliver *fusuma* that are in their best interests. This is the kind of conscientiousness that goes beyond his technical skills, for which Mr. Orimoto has succeeded in attracting customers.

The price differs depending on the type of paper used too, so it can range from one extreme to the other, starting from 3,000 yen and going all the way up to 100,000 yen per door. Furthermore, the price can vary greatly depending on the number of doors that need to be restored, e.g., he has worked on a set of ten doors measuring 15 meters across sandwiched between pillars.



Nothing is impossible, even overseas. It's all a matter of improvising, which is where Mr. Orimoto's skills come into play

Mr. Orimoto works with architectural designs unique to Japan, but what would he do if he were to work with European-style architecture?

"For example, if I was asked to paste paper onto the wall of a European-style house, it would be difficult because the wall would have an uneven surface. I would begin by discussing what the customer wanted to create. Then I would need to look at the on-site conditions before making a final decision. But as a general rule, I would inspect the actual building to gain a grasp of its atmosphere, then obtain blueprints of it, and check samples of the materials that I would be using. As long as I could do that, how I use the materials would depend on their thickness and other factors, and the rest would be left up to improvisation. As a general rule, there is no job I cannot do, as long as I can check the building in advance. My job is to improvise so I can meet the needs of the customer."

He has yet to work in Europe, but he has experienced working overseas as an assistant for his father through a major Japanese construction company, when they were asked to make fusuma for a house in Taiwan. They took their tools and a set of materials, and made fusuma on-site, which he says was no different from working in Japan.

In the future, there are great expectations, both domestically and internationally, for *hyogu* creations of miniature *byobu* and *shoji* made from *otoshi* (leftover pieces of *washi*) from restoring *shoji*.

"Normally, we give the *otoshi* to the customer so they can use it to repair their *shoji* when a part of it gets damaged. But it may be possible to make miniature *byobu* from the *otoshi* of expensive *washi*."

He is honest and meticulous in adhering to tradition, as he aims to deliver more than what his customers expect of him, and makes use of the existing *hyogu* material to bring out its full potential. Mr. Orimoto says that no job is impossible as long as he can improvise, and with this challenging spirit, he is set to blow a breath of fresh air into the world of *hyogushi*.